

## [Shelburne Falls]

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Shelburne Falls

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TOPIC Study of Folklore in Franklin County

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Shelburne Falls has always been the home of healthy people - at least a large number of its men and women lived to be very old. Many of them passed the century mark. The Smith family, long residents of this town, are examples. The Smith name appears early in the records of the town. They were originally of English ancestry but long residence in New England made them part of the group of individuals known as Yankees. Beginning as mill workers as so many English did, the Smith's, as time went on, were clever enough to establish a manufacturing business of their own and the grandfather and great grandfather of the character we are to describe were the "go-getters" of the line. They made money enough to take care of their families, which were large considering the number of Smiths in town at one time, and there was money left for the next two or three generations. This apparently would tend to set "Gus" Smith and Luther Smith, his son, apart from any discussion of "hill-billies". With money one may be eccentric and the people may talk, there remains a certain deference towards one's money which glosses over characteristics which in a poor person would make one definitely a "hick." In the cases of "Gus" and Luther we must forget the money. They did. Either that or they were shrewd enough not to mention it and people had to judge that they had money because their folks had it and they evidently didn't make themselves rich because they never worked. At least "Gus" Smith never worked. "Fat Gus" could be seen walking the streets almost any time.

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It may have been in a vain attempt to reduce Mass 1938-9 2 but it was likely that he had little else to do. One fact about Gus that caused considerable humorous comment was the fact he wore corsets to keep his abnormally large figure in some manageable shape. It didn't matter to Gus that all the corsets did was to drive his fat from around his waist and distribute it above and below the lines of the corsets. He bulged under his chin so that he couldn't see the ground within several feet of himself. Gus was satisfied tho. He had taken the advice of friends and relatives and wore the corsets and was secure in the knowledge he "cut quite a figger." Gus and Mrs. Smith both lived to be almost a hundred years old before they died. Mrs. Smith was distinguished because of her pure white hair. They had several children and two of them, a daughter who is a nurse and Luther a son are still living on the land the Smiths have always owned. Luther Smith is now eighty years old and his sister is still caring for him as she has since their folks died. He is in very poor health now having a complication of illnesses including a serious heart ailment.

Despite the fact that there was money in the family and that Luther was given a college education he never was and has never been more than a hill billy. He was character when he went to college, supposedly to study dentistry and his extreme individualism has only increased with his years. He explains, "Ma fengers were too long to centinue on to be a dentist and nif the truth was knowna didn't want ta be one anyway." The reason Luther didn't finish his studies was because of incurable fits. A great many townspeople in 3 the course of Luther's life and progress around Shelburne Falls have had to minister to him when he was "taken sudden". Luther is a great inventor - according to him - but a number of his inventions have almost been his undoing. He was mowing the church lawn one day, with a scythe he had made specially himself and had one of his "fits". He didn't relinquish his hold on the scythe and nearly slashed himself to ribbons before he could be helped. It finally took five men to get the scythe away from him and give him treatment.

Before going into Luther's inventions an attempt must be made to give a description of him! He is extremely tall and very slim. When he walks he takes long, slow strides, head

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down and bent forward and his hands are chasped tightly behind his back. Whatever emotion he may feel, his face always registers thotfulness. His expression would convey to anyone who might see for the first time an idea that he was profoundly interested in some deep problem. To talk to him is a different matter and one experiences the same feeling of shock as when one hears a beautiful child use profanity. Luther has only one eye. The other was lost in a quarry explosion. An old fellow who was working in another section of the quarry has a wholesome disrespect for Luther's expiriments and when approached concerning the incident of the quarry blast he voiced his sentiments in no uncertain teram. "By darn, yes awas theyah, but we none uv us came out uv thet place with mor'n our skins. Lucky ta hev them!

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Thet tarnal fool put anuff powder in thet hole that he was putterin' aroun' with ta blow us all ta kingdom come. You know where thet ol' quarry is dontcha? Wall its across the river on the Buckland side. "Lute" owned the quarry soa guess he could do 'bouts he pleased with it but hed we knowed he want up to his business with thet explodin' powder we sure wount hev been settin' an' standing 'round theyah like ninnies. Waal 'twas funny ta think uv aftawerds. Lute never was one ta wait 'round fer somethin' ta happen gradual like. Ifn it didn't come right along 'bouts quick as he thot it hed ought ta he'd hev a conipation. As a remember he was lookin' ta get out a piece a rock ta use in some of his fool inventions. Waal the rock came out fine but it blew Lutes eye out in the proceedins'. 'sa wonder it di'nt blow him clearn up onta Prospect Maoun'n (Mountain) an us along fer company. Ya-uh, Lute hed to wear a glass eye er et least he hed one made attar thet business but it must uv hurt him dint fit some ways fer he never wore it none ta speak uv."

Luther was an enthusiastic ice skater too and every year up until this last year or so he has gone skating on the Deerfield River from the cutlery mills dam, back under the two bridges - the regular highway bridge and the old trolley car bridge now called the Bridge of Flowers. He delighted in the sport and was quite a show off with his absurd "fancy skating" before his "limbs" gave him trouble. It is difficult to control him now for like so many of

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these "tough" old Yankees he believes sickness is a sign of weakness and he hates to admit. He knows he could very well be 5 out skating or puttering around in his old "work shop". Luther even made himself a pair of old fashioned skates. He has allowed a young fellow to use them when he wasn't able to but the boy is a prime favorite of his. Most of the young boys are "smart fry to Luther because few of the town boys haven't laughed at him or had amusement at his expense. The last time Luther went skating before he was taken ill he fell into the river. The ice was thin under the trolley bridge and Luther wasn't taking advice so consequently his young friend, who happened to be with him that day had to pull him out and take him home. The episode didn't dampen Luther's enthusiasm for the sport and if his spirit holds out he may go skating again before he dies.

The inventions that are Luther's are not his life work - not his living - as he would like to have anyone believe. They might be called his hobby altho he does no other work. If Luther had depended on his inventions to bring him food and shelter he would long ago have faced starvation and freezing. Some trees on Luther's property were dying because some type of borer insect had worked into the foot of the trunk. He was much impressed and spent hours trying to make a wax that would seal in those borers already in the tree and smother them and at the same time keep other borers out. The wax didn't exactly do that but it did work fairly successfully as a grafting wax. Luther wasn't interested in that possibility so the wax was put aside for other "work".

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Luther had a cider press at one time. He became dissatisfied with the ordinary mechanism of the affair and decided he wanted an automatic press. Finally he set up one with an endless chain of sack cloth that folded the apples into the cloth and pressed them. The cider came out but the process was slower than the old press. It worked but it never paid and Luther didn't mind because all he wanted was that his press would be automatic and he had accomplished his purpose. Saws were another of the lines into which he went. He liked to make saw blades for cutting intricate figures from wood such as the small figures for lawn decoration. They too worked if no pressure was exerted on them. Each worker

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had to have a stack of spare blades for one piece o of work to allow for the breakage. Luther tried to organize a class of boys to make the wood carvings with his saws but the boys couldn't afford to buy all the blades they needed and the class never went very far. There is also a machine to sharpen lawn mowers to Luther's credit. If it had a contrivance to fasten it to make it stationery the machine would work well. As it is parts of the lawn mower blades are sharpened very sharp and other parts don't get touched. The result is that when one starts to mow the grass some of it clipped very close and some of it bends around the blade. Luther thot so much of this invention that he had it mounted and made into a trailer affair which he dragged behind his ancient Essex from place to place in Shelburne Falls Curiosity on the part of most of his customers gave him his first work but the steady employment with his machine died off after that.

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People watched Luther's work, immensely amused because they knew altho he had the ideas he lacked the capacity to carry them thru to complete success and his efforts were not made for any definite benefit to mankind. When an invention failed, he had neither the will nor the ability to start again and find the fault or faluts with the idea and perfect it with an idea to ultimate success. When his invention didn't work it was cast aside and soon a new and as useless one took its place. Had he possessed the spark of love for humanity he might have invented less but perfected some one thing for the good of other people. Someone with an eye to this need thot that if he were put on a new line and given a new idea of the needs of science he might accidentally stumble onto some truth that would prove valuable at least to other workers so they gave hin an old spy glass. It was a powerful glass and mounted on a tripod. Well, instead of using it to study and gain new ideas, Luther went on a vacation with it. He stopped all work and began a long tour of the town. Carrying the tripod under his arm and wherever he went he soon became a familiar sight. He carried that unwieldly contrivance around like an ordinary man might carry an umbrella. If he met an acquaintance or a perfect stranger he stopped them. If a person were in a hurry they dared not speak to Luther.

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The object of Luther's interest and the reason he stopped everyone he met was to have them look thru his spy glass at the Fire Tower on Massamet or old Bald Mountain the highest elevation in Shelburne 8 Falls. People say it did bring the tower very near but to Luther it was amazing. He had to share this wonder with every person in the town and he did his best to contact them all by taking his tripod on to every street and finding every vantage point too look at the tower. This went on until people avoided him and his only spectators were a noisy group of children, who delighted in his oddities. They quarrelled with one another to look thru Luther's spy glass until Luther himself became incapable of coping with the situation and retired again to his inventing.

He had a small cutlery in which he made innumerable small gadgets which had very little use. He made axe handles which he shaved out by hand and which were fine if they didn't shatter in the hands of a wood chopper at a good hard blow. His last big deed was putting a cement furnace in a newly built house. He conceived the idea that the furnace could be built of cement at the same time the house cement was put in and instructed the workers to build this way. When the house was finished and a fire was built, the furnace smoked so furiously that it was impossible to remain in the place. The outcome of it was that a whole section of the house had to be torn down and a regular furnace installed. It was a costly "invention" to say the least.

Luther Smith may not live to invent anything more. He would like to but he has numerous serious illnesses now which may keep him down until he dies. However he has given the town material enough for gossip and conversation so that his name may live for years. His ideas may not have been useful in themselves but what other people think and say about them has proven to be of some benefit. He was and is a product of Shelburne Falls and somehow representative of it.